

Robert Curvin Interview: Gloria Buck

CURVIN: This is Gloria Buck, a friend and Newark civic activists, great contributor to the life and culture and education of our community and we're going to spend some time this morning having a conversation with Gloria. So Gloria why don't we start by you talking a little bit about how you got involved in Newark

GLORIA: Well initially came to this area in 1961 newly married and my husband at the time was entering Rutgers Law School, and I had secured a job with the State Board of Welfare, which is now the Division of Youth and Family Services, and even though I lived in East Orange I got a pretty good sense of Newark with my work with the State Board of Child Welfare I worked with foster children and--

The video cuts and they begin again.

CURVIN: I am sitting here this morning with Gloria Buck one of our outstanding citizens who has been involved in the city for many years as a great contributor to the life and culture of Newark. We're going to have a conversation with Gloria this morning. Why don't we start by you just saying a little bit about how you got introduced to this area?

GLORIA: Well in 1961 as a newlywed, we came to Newark because my husband was entering Rutgers Law School and I had secured a job with State Board of Child Welfare which is now the Division of Youth and Family Services. Through my work I got to know Newark and particularly the families, the citizens in Newark, primarily I would say in the South and Central areas I worked with.

CURVIN: Which were the areas with most of the African American population.

GLORIA: Where most of the African American population was. And looking back maybe I was assigned because of my color, but I work with the families who were in protective services and also with foster children. I also had an opportunity to go around the state talking to other offices with State Board of Child Welfare on Black History and how the history of African-Americans certainly would affect the way in which they perceived the families. This was done to better able to help the families to understand some of the ethnic and cultural differences so that they can do a better job with them.

CURVIN: Do you recall any particular feelings or observations that you had about how the City worked and the state of the social conditions in the city at that time?

GLORIA: I did get a sense that there was a division in the city. At the time Hugh Addonizio was the mayor. I felt that there was a disconnect, I would talk with the families and they seemed to be almost confined to their particular area of Newark. They would not even venture downtown and basically functioned in their own neighborhood. Also I think with the media, basically New York dominated, that they would identify with the city of New York. If you asked them who is mayor, it was Mayor Lindsay, I think he was the mayor at the time and that they did not have a sense where they were actually. And then in 1967, which was right after the

Rebellion, I began working for the school system as a licensed clinical social worker and I was placed in West Kinney Junior High which was right in the area where the Rebellion began.

CURVIN: Where the most poverty and dislocation occurred in the city. So what was that like?

GLORIA: Actually, I am a lover of cities. In fact, I came from Washington DC to this area and I understood some of the dynamics that were happening in the city which I think helped me to understand what was happening with the families in that area. When I arrived there was a lot of tension in school, there was the white faculty and administration, I think, were struggling with the fact that perhaps the Rebellion was against them. And that so they were refusing to do hall duties which they felt would put them in jeopardy. Meanwhile families were-- children were in youth house, some of their families in the hospital and some of the families--

CURVIN: As a result of injuries or arrest from the Rebellion--

GLORIA: Exactly, from the Rebellion so it was fairly tense. What I did an addition to working with the families and the children, I felt that there was a need to talk with the faculty about what was happening give them an opportunity to share their feelings and to clarify through things though.

During the lunch hour I gave workshops where the faculty would come and we would talk about what happened and what the results were in school because it was actually affecting the whole atmosphere of the school. It was affecting the ability of the students to learn, the teachers to teach, and we talked about how important it is to understand and know the students that you are working with.

Now mind you this was-- I'm coming from Washington DC, where all of my role models, my positive role models, were Black because all the teachers were Black. The principal, the administrators, were Black and I had a very good sense of who I was in terms of we had Black history and I lived in an all-Black neighborhood and even with desegregation you go to the school in your neighborhood so there were really no white students in my high school.

So when I came to Newark the situation was so different, you had all Black students and you had predominantly white staff. So one of the things that I did was to talk about how color does make a difference, that you can't be color blind because color is part of who you are and that when you see color and you see race, that you have certain stereotypes and perceptions that will definitely affect the manner in which you see the students that you're teaching.

So we had-- and I had documentation of this and that once you get past it then you can deal with it the students for who they were and then they had to understand to the circumstances of the Rebellion, which they called riots in the school but I felt that it did help to ease the tensions in the school and get back into to learning. The Students for a Democratic Society were busy at work, they were busy meeting with students after school, I guess in an attempt to organize or to help, quote unquote, but I know that the students didn't have permission to do this, they were buying them ice cream and things like that so I just marched down there to the meetings to more or less protect my students because I thought they had some misconceptions and were going

about it the wrong way, so I spoke at a couple of those meetings and actually along with some of the staff from the school, we just stopped the kids from going.

CURVIN: So this was also the beginning of people beginning thinking about the election coming up so did you have any role or participation or have any role in organizing?

GLORIA: Voters Information Council, do you remember that? I felt that it was sort of a prelude to the African-American and Latino Political Conference that was held and that this was sort of in the working and not only involved Newarkers but people in the suburbs also. I didn't have direct involvement but I did-- I was encouraging my families to vote in this process.

CURVIN: How long did you continue working in the schools?

GLORIA: Well until 2000.

CURVIN: If you think back to how the schools have evolved over those almost 40 years, what kind of changes have you seen?

GLORIA: Well I saw that, well they had an organization that was established in the 60s called the Organization of Negro Educators and that was an attempt to have more Black administrators and however I did see before that happened teachers went elsewhere seeking those administrative positions and they left Newark--

CURVIN: You mean African American teachers? Because there was not the opportunity...

GLORIA: Because there was not the opportunity to be an administrator here in Newark, but of course that changed when I started working. There was no Martin Luther King holiday you know, there was primarily Jewish holidays but I think the only recognition, Black person, a historical figure was Crispus Attucks, Crispus Attucks day, and there was some, there was a movement to put more Black history in the schools and that I saw was a change to be integrated into the curriculum and as we were getting more and more black students of course. I've seen the change in the population in the Newark school system. I think, from my perspective, as a licensed clinical social worker that there was more attention to evaluating students so that they could have the best educational placement and the best educational opportunity. Then the pendulum swung to classifying too many kids without--

CURVIN: Classifying them as being limited or disabled

GLORIA: So that there was more of an effort to integrate students with challenges in the regular school population

CURVIN: A lot of people just look at the schools today in Newark and say 'they don't work' is that your general impression?

GLORIA: Well when I was raising my two children I had sent them to private school because I couldn't, while I was working very hard in the school system to make certain changes, I couldn't

sacrifice them and I-- This neighborhood sort of reflected the different changes in the school system by the way this neighborhood I live in, this short block has about 13 ethnic groups in it.

CURVIN: Really? Why don't you talk -- When did you move here by the way?

GLORIA: Well I moved here in 1971.

CURVIN: What is the neighborhood called?

GLORIA: It's called Forest Hill in North Newark and this was a neighborhood that basically was Italian and was controlled by one real estate person who I guess decided who was going to live in this area and we actually didn't know a lot about this area until somebody said why don't you try in North Newark we tried to buy a home in Vailsburg but the man decided not to sell so we just sort of came over we had a two year old daughter and my husband in 71 had just been appointed a Municipal Court Judge so I guess we were the proper African Americans to live in this area.

CURVIN: You qualify.

GLORIA: Yea we qualify [with air quotes] and they first showed us a home that Frank Sinatra's hairdresser had bought and redone. His wife died suddenly but they saw it as the three of us rattling around and that house and they said oh I think I have the right house for you and they showed us this home and that's how you know we got into this area.

One of the next door neighbors was a Dutch family that Reverend Baracloud [SP] [16:22] was the pastor of Reformed Church on Broad Street and I think this was sort of like their Parish home, The Dutch family had lived previously before they arrived, Reverend got married and they had two children and they formed oh, there were other young families in the neighborhood, and they formed cooperative nurseries and they did all they could to stay in Newark and educate their children but when they begin to get a little older they did not want to continue to send the kids to private school so they moved to Maplewood where there was a diverse neighborhood and they could send their kids to the neighborhood schools.

CURVIN: Going back to the larger picture of the public schools do you have any thoughts as to what you would do to make education work? In a city like Newark?

GLORIA: I'm thinking at this point and I never thought I would say this but the charter schools. well probably, the establishment of charter schools would probably put a lot of pressure on the public schools to do a better job and I think that you have so many families that are challenged

CURVIN: Challenged in what way?

GLORIA: Economically. Newark had a large population of children who were affected by alcoholism, AIDS and drugs and a lot of these students are in the school system and I think that we need to offer perhaps more services to these students. And I think a lot of times they are included in the statistics that say that our kids sometimes are not learning when they are faced with a lot of handicapping conditions

CURVIN: The challenge of teaching in an environment where there are so many kids who come with so many deep social issues it's really quite difficult

GLORIA: I think that the center schools have worked. Science High, Arts High, University, Technical High, where they've been able to concentrate and actually be selective in terms of who attends the school. To concentrate on the learning.

CURVIN: Let's turn to a topic that I'm sure you are very proud and excited about and that is the Newark Black Film Festival. Can you tell us a little bit about how that started? And sort of track its growth and development to where it is today?

GLORIA: Well it started in 1975, and actually Gus Henningburg who was the president of the Urban Coalition at the time was visiting Philadelphia and discovered that they had a Black Film Festival that was put together by this Black independent filmmaker, Oliver Franklin, out of the _____ [20:24] Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

It was a touring Festival and it was financed by the Center of Arts Management and it was for probably a period of 5 years. And Gus said this is exactly what Newark needs. And the first venue we thought of was the Newark Museum. He approached the museum about bringing the festival to Newark under their auspices and they jumped at it.

The packaging for two years was all ready, I think this was already the third year of the five-year touring Festival. So from 75 to 76, the museum shows the films. We didn't have an auditorium until 1989 so we used the New Jersey Institute of Technology which readily partnered with us to do the films and when the film source was no longer available to us in 77. The Division of Programs and Publications at the Museum decided that they would continue showing the films and selected a committee to choose the films and prepare and plan the program.

Dr. Clement Price and James Brown of the Newark Public library and myself were the founding members of the selection committee. We have shown films for 34 years. This is our 34th year. Films that reflect the life history and culture of African Americans and the Black diaspora. And this was a time when I was motivated to do this because of what it could do for the families and the children of the families of Newark. Creating a more positive image and for them to see themselves as positive and in positive ways.

CURVIN: There have been some amazing highlights over the years. Can you name a couple things that you consider--How many people attend in the course of a summer now?

GLORIA: I'll say we have over two or three thousand over the summer and we also have a youth cinema and we show films to our younger community, young people and teens at the Library and Museum.

CURVIN: And the festival has now moved to Trenton?

GLORIA: Yes we have, that was one of our dreams the Bank of America made it possible to travel the festival, so we are at the State Museum in Trenton and Asbury Park and we just added Camden.

CURVIN: Well it has been quite an achievement really. Now were you a board member participant at the Museum?

GLORIA: Well this was- started in 1977, in 1978 I was appointed to the Board of Trustees at the Newark Museum and later a vice president of the board.

CURVIN: And you were recently honored for 25 years of service

GLORIA: Yes I received a recognition and an award for my work over 20 years with the museum.

CURVIN: And what does the museum mean to the city of Newark?

GLORIA: You know the museum will be a hundred years old next year and it has deep roots in the city of Newark and it has acclaimed not only national recognition but international recognition. And it has made this community, the museum reflects the culture, ethnicity, and the interest of this community through its exhibitions and programs. In fact, it has been recognized by major funding sources as one of the many assets of this Museum to appeal to the many interests of a diverse people.

CURVIN: There's a lot of talk about the recovery that's going on in Newark today, the new buildings and the new structures, new housing and all of that, can you say a little bit about your observations of that, the recovery and how it's going?

GLORIA: I think this Renaissance is amazing. I ride around in the city and I'm amazed I am always discovering new housing new buildings and I think it's on its way, the Gibson Administration really started this movement when he was elected in 1970 and the attention that he paid to the wellbeing and health of the city and involved arts culture and economics and housing

CURVIN: Can you give some specific examples, because there's also kind of an, I guess, a contrary view that not very much happened at that time

GLORIA: Well I know he's certainly supported the arts and culture, even when there were economic difficulties, budget problems with providing basic services, he funded the arts, he funded the Newark Museum because he had a sense that this is this is very important to the spirit and the life of the city. I think that just ask Cory Booker is getting a lot of credit for some of the things that Sharpe James started oh, I think that Sharpe got some of the credit for some of the things that Mayor Gibson put into motion.

CURVIN: People seem to forget that Prudential made a major commitment to the city during that time right after the Rebellion, invested in the development of Gateway, public service decided to stay and build a new headquarters oh, those were done under Gibson's Administration.

GLORIA: And I certainly saw that the citizens of Newark were identifying more with the administration there was not that isolation that you saw oh, there was some division between North and South. There was the Italian area. There was the Kawaida Towers, that kind of symbolized the

CURVIN: Explain a little bit about what Kawaida Towers was

GLORIA: This was-- Amiri Baraka wanted to build a building right in the middle of the North Ward, a housing building, and Anthony Imperiali [SP] , who was a force in the North Ward resisted this attempt because I guess it was, it was always a battle between North and South and actually Black and white as it turned out.

CURVIN: And this was during Gibson's first term and shortly after he took office he was confronted with this major conflict. How is it ultimately resolved?

GLORIA: It wasn't built. It wasn't built. And I don't think it was considered a defeat but

CURVIN: Even though the foundation of the building had been poured and laid

GLORIA: It never actually materialized

CURVIN: let's talk about the prospects you talked about the recovery being extremely exciting we also have a new mayor, a relatively new mayor, how do you see the future of Newark?

GLORIA: I think I'm excited about the future of Newark. I think that there are so many indications in every area of Newark that we are on our way to a major, major Renaissance.

CURVIN: Are there some specific things that you would like to see happen that would make that Renaissance more real?

GLORIA: I would like to see more of the middle class that left Newark, like a re-gentrification of the city, to come back to the city. I think this tends to improve your schools and other essential services in the city. I don't think enough attention has been paid by the administration, this factor of getting more middle class people back into the city. This city has so many positive aspects that it needs to be marketed more, it's the University Town, a town of arts and culture. in 1985, I think Newark was 8th in terms of where you had a lot of arts and culture. I think the New York Times had written an article on the emerging artist colonies that were developing during that time. And we see another resurgence of the Arts community developing more and people coming to Newark for recreation.

CURVIN: Any thoughts on how you get to this issue of young people with guns willing to give up their lives at 25 thinking that life is short useless anyway?

GLORIA: I worked with groups of students, I was one of the social workers who would be called to schools to respond to a crisis where there was a shooting or guns, and what I found was that value of human life, and that the sense that they weren't going to live to become old, that they were going to die at 20 or 21 before they--

CURVIN: How did they get to that?

GLORIA: A very poor self-image, dysfunctional families. I think that there are more agencies working to change this, to improve the quality of life for these for-- those students. I think that there are more organizations working in sync, the Boys & Girls Clubs, and you have corporations and organizations are really geared towards improving the quality of life and to uplift the spirits and having people feel that they have an opportunity to live a better life.

CURVIN: The new mayor-- do you have any communication with City Hall these days and how is he doing? How is he doing? I guess that is the question.

GLORIA: I think he's doing well. I think outside of Newark you get comments like oh you have a wonderful mayor, a new and exciting mayor who is going to make a lot of changes. I feel that he is making a difference in the progress of Newark oh, I would like to see him buy a home in Newark and be a taxpayer in Newark and be more of a part of the community and situate himself in Newark so he can say come visit Newark and people outside of Newark can visit Newark with him in the neighborhood in his home. We don't have a greasy mansion but you know people certainly get a feeling of New York when they visit the mayor of New York. I would like to see him be more integrated into the mainstream of Newark. I felt we did need a change and I'm giving him time.

CURVIN: Are there any more topics we haven't addressed that you would like to add to this conversation?

GLORIA: I think that when the movement out of the city particularly after the Rebellion and the reputation of the schools, did not accurately describe what the Black middle class, the Black middle class to me is you know you're working you have a job that you can support yourself oh, nothing so esoteric. The black middle class may have left the city but not in their hearts and minds. Many organizations and clubs and institutions, they still contributed to the city.

CURVIN: Particularly through the churches

GLORIA: Through the churches. I know at one time I knew all of the Black families in Short Hills, and they used to invite me to their homes and one of the main topics was what was going on in Newark and the arts and culture, and they supported those things, the things that were happening at the Newark Museum and the Newark Library, Symphony Hall, and I think the first chance they get they will be back, in fact some of their siblings have moved back to Newark.

CURVIN: So you think there's a good reason for a come home campaign.

GLORIA: Yes

CURVIN: Great. Well that's a nice way to conclude our conversation this morning. I want to thank you very, very much.